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“The Millenary of King Alfred.”

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BY

FREDERIC HARRISON,

President for the Year of the Birmingham and Midland Institute.

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"THE MILLENARY OF KING ALFRED"

IT is our privilege or our curse (we are often reminded) to live in an age which has an insatiable love of bigness, of numbers, of new things. And yet it is profitable from time to time to turn back in thought upon some great epoch of old, to remind ourselves that true grandeur is independent of size and of multitude; and to reflect how infinitely more precious is high *quality* than any *quantity* ever can be to man.

During all the varied pageants of this Jubilee year my own thoughts have now and then gone back to the early struggles of this England of ours to be a nation, to the first organic life of our English civilisation, and especially to that matchless hero of our English race who was the incarnation of all that we most cherish in the national character and mind. We are now within a few days of the anniversary of the death of Alfred, King of Wessex; and in four years more—in October, 1901—we shall count exactly a thousand years since England lost the noblest of Englishmen. I trust that, in the first year of the twentieth century, the English-speaking world may unite in its tribute of homage to the Hero-Saint who was the true Father (if any man can be so styled) of our common literature, "the model Englishman," as Freeman calls him, the herald of our civic and religious organisation. It is of King Alfred as the greatest of Englishmen, and of his thousandth anniversary in the year 1901, that I come to speak to-night.

Do we Englishmen even yet measure at its full height the supreme glory of our national hero? It is a commonplace with historians—and with the historians of many countries and different schools of opinion—that our English Alfred was the only perfect man of action recorded in history; for Aurelius was occasionally too much of the philosopher; Saint Louis usually too much of the saint; Godfrey too much of the Crusader; the great Emperors were not Saints at all; and of all more modern heroes we know too much to pretend that they were perfect. Of all the hyperboles of praise there is but one that we can safely justify with the strictest

canons of historic research. Of all the names in history there is only our English Alfred whose record is without stain and without weakness—who is equally amongst the greatest of men in genius, in magnanimity, in valour, in moral purity, in intellectual force, in practical wisdom, and in beauty of soul. I have been studying of late the whole series of the authentic sources for his recorded career from infancy to death, and I have found no single trait that is not noble and suggestive, nor a single act or word that can be counted as a flaw. I invite you to-night to reflect with me upon this glorious inheritance of our English name.

In the history of modern Europe there is nothing which can compare in duration and in organic continuity with the unbroken evolution of our English nation. And now that the royal house of France has passed from the sphere of political realities into that of historic memories, there is no dynasty in Europe which can be named in the same breath with that which has seen a succession of forty-nine sovereigns since Alfred; nor has any King or Cæsar a record of ancestry which can compare with that of the royal Lady who through thirty-two generations traces her lineal descent to the Hero-King of Wessex.

We have long given up the venerable fables which once gathered round the name of Alfred, as round Romulus, or Theseus, King Arthur, or the Cid. Every schoolboy knows that Alfred was never King of all England; that he did not introduce trial by jury, or electoral institutions; that he did not found the University of Oxford; nor write all the pieces which are attributed to his pen; that he was no doubt too practical a man to let his own supper get burnt on the hearth; and too wary a general to go about masquerading with a harp in the enemy's camp. But the historic Alfred whom we know to-day is a personage more splendid and life-like than the legendary Alfred ever was. Though much of what our grandsires believed about Alfred is now known to be poetry and pious fraud, the traditional Alfred was quite just in general effect, and modern research has given us a portrait both nobler and more definite than that drawn by the patriotic imagination of a less critical age. Patriotic imagination itself falls far short of scrupulous scholarship when it seeks to draw the likeness of a real hero.

It is true that the field of Alfred's achievements was relatively small, and the whole scale of his career was modest indeed when compared with that of his imperial compeers. He inherited a kingdom which covered only a few English counties, and at one time his realm was reduced to a smaller area than that of some private landlords of modern times. Beside the great Emperor Charles, or

the German Ottos, Henrys, and Fredericks of the Middle Ages, his dominions, his resources, his armies, his battles, his fleets, his administrative machinery, his contemporary glory—all these were almost in miniature—hardly a tithe of theirs. But, as I began by saying, it is *quality* not *quantity* that weighs in the impartial scales of History. True human greatness needs no vast territories as its stage—nor do multitudes add to its power. That which tells in the end is the living seed of the creative mind, the heroic example, the sovereign gift of leadership, the undying inspiration of genius and faith.

I would commend to any thoughtful person (even if he have not the leisure to become a professed student) to try and master the biography of Alfred in the original sources. He could not have a better introduction to the serious study of History. Our authentic memorials of the great King are very moderate in bulk. I imagine that the whole of them would hardly give more words than a single novel or newspaper to-day. The contemporary record is somewhat mutilated, it has been tampered with, interpolated, and otherwise corrupted. And to some extent it has been subjected to deliberate falsification. To eliminate the genuine from the spurious Asser, to probe the authority for the legend and for the authentic anecdote, requires some critical care. But it is not at all difficult; it has been thoroughly done by competent scholars; and compared with many historical problems, it is simplicity itself. I cannot imagine a better type for historical study than a minute study of the *English Chronicle*, with the *Memoir* of Asser, comparing these with the later compilers, imitators, and copyists, such as Florence and Ethelwerd—assisted by the *Life* of Dr. Pauli, the *Histories* of Freeman, Green, and Sharon Turner, and the *Essays* of Kemble, Earle, Sweet and Bishop Stubbs. A careful reader would soon find that he had mastered almost every statement about Alfred's nature and career for which there is trustworthy and original evidence. And he will have had an excellent object-lesson in the mode in which history has been distorted by romance, carelessness, patriotism, and fraud, and in the critical tests by which historians have now learned to winnow the chaff from the grain.

Turn to the *Chronicle* and to Asser's *Life* with the help of Pauli, Freeman, and Green, and mark, learn, and inwardly digest those miracles of patience, valour, indomitable energy by which the great King rescued from the savage Norsemen the England of our forefathers. Watch him as he returns to the charge after every repulse, rallies his exhausted men, gathers up new armies, plans fresh methods of war, and at last wins for his people prosperity, honour and peace. Take as a specimen the first year of his reign

(he was then but twenty-two). "In this year," says the *Chronicle*, "nine great battles were fought south of the Thames, besides Alfred and his ealdormen rode raids upon them which were not reckoned." And seven years later, the *Chronicle* records how the Heathen men overran Wessex and forced most of the people to submit to them, "all save King Alfred." Read how with a small band he took refuge in the fastness of Athelney; whence, marshalling a new army he gained the decisive victory of Ethandun. The scale of these campaigns was narrow—the armies were small—not indeed weaker than were the Greeks at Thermopylae and Marathon; but the annals of war have nothing grander than the long record of sagacious heroism by which Alfred saved England for the English. Then note the genius with which he saw that the Norsemen must be met on the sea, with which he organised a navy of ships built on a new design of his own. Alfred is not only the forerunner of Marlborough and Wellington, but he is also the forerunner of Blake and of Nelson.

But the civil and literary achievements of Alfred's reign are even more brilliant than his feats in war, though he must always rank with the first warriors of the English name. The skill with which he organised a sort of regular militia to take the place of hasty levies from time to time, the wise and cautious form of his laws, the reform of the judicial service, the discipline of his own household, his zeal for art, his enthusiasm for building, his passion for poetry, his profound love of history; his dignity, his grace, his tenderness, his manly piety—all are alike great, spontaneous, and beautiful—all are in harmony—none are in excess.

A fine land that had once known prosperity and even culture lay utterly ruined and desolate when Alfred undertook the vast task of its restoration—its material, moral, intellectual reform. He said in his Will, "we were all despoiled by the Heathen Folk." He found the enemy in possession of something like a standing army of disciplined soldiers; and you will note how the *Chronicle* calls the Norsemen "the army." He met this by instituting a regular militia with local garrisons and a reserve force capable of systematic war. When Alfred marshals a new campaign we find that the era of wild raids to be met by casual musters of countrymen is a thing of the past. Alfred at last has his "army" too. We are dealing with regular armies capable of sustaining organised campaigns.

A navy needed to be created and not simply reformed. And the safety of the Southern shores of England—the first command of the Channel—must be dated from the day when Alfred began the formation of an adequate fleet. It is true that in the absence of

competent seamen in Wessex, he had to man his earliest ships with Frisians from over the sea. But in later years he came to have a really English fleet of his own. And it is plain that in a true sense he is the inventor, if not the actual founder, of a national navy : of that sea-power which is the birthright of this island.

The mark of Alfred as King is the creative mind. He was never King of even the larger part of what we now call England ; but he made it possible that there should be a King of England. He created in men's minds from the Severn to the Humber the sense of solidarity as a nation. His use of his first great victory at the Peace of Wedmore which settled the Danes in East Anglia as Christian allies, gave new blood as well as temporary peace to the Saxon realm. It virtually created the composite England of history. That the young hero of twenty-nine, like the great Charles in Germany, sought to civilise and incorporate the invaders, not to win fresh victories, marks an organising genius of the first order. His whole conception of the ruler, as related in the *Chronicle* and in his own writings, has the stamp of insight, practical wisdom, devotion to duty. It is at once creative and conservative ; prescient of a distant future, yet averse to all violent change. In his revised laws, he says, he was careful not to make changes " that might not please those that come after us." Such daring and such prudence have rarely met in any one brain.

His legislation was deeply infused with conservative, and even a Biblical spirit ; but in the administration of justice he showed the most trenchant energy and a passionate zeal for reform. He was his own Court of Appeal ; and judges who laid down false law were made to tremble at his rebuke. How far he organised the local administration of counties is still rather obscure. He certainly improved it as a system, and founded something like a course of regular assizes. He made Wessex an organic Kingdom, and he made Wessex the type for England to follow.

His relations to the Church were wholly without a cloud or a blot—alike free from the violence or the impolicy which too often discredited even the noblest sovereigns of his age. From the hour when the child Prince of four was anointed by Pope Leo in Rome, down to the day when the Canons laid his bones in the Old Minster of Winchester, the career of Alfred presents to us the purest type of the normal relations between the temporal and spiritual powers—a type of more wisdom than that of St. Henry or St. Louis, more truly spiritual than that of the Emperors Charles or Otto. How beautiful, how wise, how beneficent were the King's call to his side of Asser, the Briton, from Wales ; of Grimbold, the Frank, from St.

Omer; of John from Westphalia; of Plegmund of Mercia, his Archbishop of Canterbury. To Alfred, Religion, Culture, Intelligence had no local limits. He was essentially European, even cosmopolitan, in his genius. Twice as a boy he had been at Rome and had witnessed the inauguration of the new Papal Rome on the Vatican. He had been too at the Court of the great Frank King, whose daughter became his step-mother; he had known all that was foremost in the civilisation of the century: he resolved to transplant it to England. His mission to the Christians of India, his frequent missions to Rome, his voyages of discovery to the North Cape and the Baltic under Ohthere and Wulfstan, were his message to the world that Britain was no longer an *ultima Thule*, but henceforth was to march in the van of Progress. He was, says Freeman, "the spiritual and intellectual leader of his people."

Yes! it is in his own writings that we come to love Alfred best. No ruler of men has left us so pellucid a revelation of his own soul. Like the *Meditations* of Aurelius and the *Psalms* of David he has given to men the outpourings of his aspirations and his sorrows. Neither Richelieu, Cromwell, nor William the Silent, ever recorded more frankly their problems and their aims. In the authentic writings of Alfred we are in the presence of one who is a teacher as much as a King—who recalls to us Augustine and à-Kempis, or Bunyan and Jeremy Taylor. His *Boethius* served him as texts whereon he preached to his people profound sermons on the moral and spiritual life. Read his homily on Riches,— "that it is better to give than to receive"—on the true Ruler,— "that power is never a good unless he be good that has it"—on the uses of Adversity—"no wise man should desire a soft life." Few men ever had so hard a life—with his mysterious and cruel malady—"his thorn in the flesh" until his early death—with his distracted and ruined kingdom—his ferocious enemies—his never-ending cares. And amidst it all we have the King in his silent study pouring out poetic thoughts upon married love, or friendship, on true happiness, or the inner life, composing pastoral poetry, or casting into English old idylls from Greek epic or myth, ending with some magnificent *Te Deum* of his own composition.

And with all this spiritual fervour, this literary genius, this passion for culture, how wonderful is the many-sided energy of the man—his skill and delight as a huntsman, his love of ballad, anecdote and merry tale, his love of all noble art, his zeal as a great builder, his ingenuity in mechanical contrivance, his invention for measuring time, his planning a new type of battleship—his supreme foresight in refounding the desolated city of London. No man ever so perfectly fulfilled the rule—"Without haste, without rest." "I

have desired," he wrote, "to live worthily, while I lived : and after my life to leave to the men that should be after me a remembrance in good works." And Alfred "the Truth-teller"—as an annalist calls him—never uttered words more true.

Let me sum up all these qualities and deeds in the words of a brilliant historian—in words as true as they are eloquent. "Alfred," says Mr. Green, "was the noblest, as he was the most complete embodiment of all that is great, all that is lovable, in the English temper. He combined, as no other man has ever combined, its practical energy, its patient and enduring force, its profound sense of duty, the reserve and self-control that steadies in it a wide outlook and a restless daring, its temperance and fairness, its frank geniality, its sensitiveness to affection, its poetic tenderness, its deep and passionate religion." (*History of the English People*, I., 75).

On the 26th of October, 1901, exactly four years hence, a thousand years will have passed since the death of our greatest King. We are a little over done with anniversaries, and those not always of the worthiest. But this is no ordinary occasion ; for it will be the thousandth anniversary of him to whom England owes an incalculable debt of gratitude, one whom our best teachers describe as the noblest Englishman recorded in our history. Alfred's name is almost the only one in the long roll of our national worthies which awakens no bitter, no jealous thought, which combines the honour of all ; Alfred represents at once the ancient Monarchy, the army, the navy, the law, the literature, the poetry, the art, the enterprise, the industry, the religion of our race. Neither Welshman, nor Scot, nor Irishman can feel that Alfred's memory has left the trace of a wound for his national pride. No difference of Church arises to separate any who would join to do Alfred honour. No Saint in the Calendar was a more loyal and cherished member of the ancient faith ; and yet no Protestant can imagine a purer and more simple follower of the Gospel. Alfred was a victorious warrior whose victories have left no curses behind them : a King whom no man ever charged with a harsh act : a scholar who never became a pedant : a Saint who knew no superstition : a hero as bold as Launcelot—as spotless as Galahad.

The commemoration of this glorious Founder of our national unity—of a man so close to the very roots of the throne, so dear to the sympathies of the people, bound up with all our traditions and institutions, the inspiration of our early literature and language—such a commemoration should be a national, not a private, concern. It should be taken out of the hands of self-nominated committees

and self-advertising busybodies, and be taken in hand by the Government of the nation, under the sanction of Parliament. The House of Commons might well vote the cost of a torpedo-boat for the Founder of our maritime power, for him to whom we largely owe it that there exist any England at all.

If it be done, it should be done royally; in a form at once magnificent and national. I do not presume to say what form it should take. I trust that, when the time comes, the Government itself will take counsel of the most competent advisers it can find. In my day-dreams I have imagined a grand *Mausoleum*, dedicated to the memory of Alfred, and in manifold forms of art recording the great events of his life. I use the word—*Mausoleum*—not in the commercial, but in the true, the historic, sense—the monument erected to King Mausolus in the fourth century B.C. by the piety of his wife.

It was one of the triumphs and one of the wonders of the ancient world: and itself exerted a dominant influence over the development of Hellenic art. All visitors to the British Museum are familiar with the fragments of it which time has spared, and have seen the suggestions of its original form over which the learned dispute.¹ It contained colossal statues of the King and his wife Artemisia—still noble even in their ruined state—a grand monumental edifice, adorned with a multitude of statues, reliefs, friezes, and finials, the least fragment of which is to-day a study and a joy. Now, I do not suggest that we should imitate that or any other monument of antiquity; but I can imagine the boundless opportunities for great commemorative art which a monument of this kind presents.

In my day-dreams I have seen rising in some conspicuous spot in Wessex a shrine in that Byzantine manner which was the dominant architecture of Europe in the age of Alfred—the style of the Holy Wisdom of Constantinople, or possibly of that Pantheon at Rome which Alfred knew—but in any case, a building wherein could be worked out in marble, in mosaic, in bronze, and in enamel, scenes to recall to us the aspect and events of our Hero's life—his terrific combats with the Dane on land and sea, his council-hall, his midnight meditations, his studies, his prayers, his boyish experiences in Rome.

What a scope for the artist in every form of art is presented by the varied incidents of that crowded life and heroic age, when

¹ See Mr. Percy Gardner's fine work on "Greek Monuments," and Mr. Ernest Gardner's "Handbook of Archæology."

all costume was noble, all accessories picturesque, and manners Homeric in simple nature. It seems to me that any fine works of art should be under a roof, and not exposed to our climate, and that a covered building might contain not only the principal monument, but a Museum to which might be transferred Alfred's Jewel at Oxford and any other genuine relic of his time, with coins, carvings, enamels, arms, robes, and any contemporary manuscript and illumination which it was possible to obtain.

Or a simpler form would be a colossal statue to be seen afar off on the top of some historic down in a more massive and bolder type of art. And if such a monument were raised in the open air, there is little doubt where it should be placed. I was the other day again in the ancient and famous city of Winchester—the royal city of Alfred, where his bones still crumble in their thrice-desecrated tomb—I thought fresh efforts should be made to identify the exact spot—and I felt how deep a debt lies on Winchester and on England to replace that lost grave at least with a cenotaph and a monument—"the tomb," says the Annals, "made of the most precious porphyry marble." How fitly it might stand on the historic Hill which looks down on College, Cathedral, and wall!

A Mausoleum which should combine a grand statue of the King with various illustrations of his life and deeds would open great opportunities to several artists in different arts. And it would be a narrow patriotism indeed which limited these artists to our own land. It would dishonour the memory of Alfred to do this. No English ruler has ever been so large-minded in all his interests, so Catholic in his task, so pre-eminently European in his type of mind. To him, of all men, Art, Learning, Culture, were too wide and human to know any local habitation. He sought out for his service, his biographer tells us, Welshmen, Irishmen, Bretons, Franks, Scots, Frisians, and Danes; "he was munificent towards foreigners of all races;" he sent abroad for teachers, artificers, discoverers and seamen. It would be a scandal if a monument to commemorate his name were not open to the genius of the civilised world.

Another thought indeed has occurred to me. Our Westminster Abbey is at last crowded to excess, and must very soon cease to be the resting place of the great men whom the nation delights to honour. We need a new Abbey, a Campo Santo, where in ages to come the noblest sons of England may be laid (as the poet says) "to the noise of the mourning of a mighty nation." It is easy to say that future ages will take care of themselves. But there is one thing that the Future cannot do—it cannot create a Past. And what it will want for its *Campo Santo*, when the venerable Abbey

can serve no longer, is a Past. A national Mausoleum of King Alfred may at least suggest Past—a past more ancient than the Abbey of the Edwards and the Henrys—it might grow into the nucleus of a national *Heröum*—just as Poets' Corner grew round the tomb of Chaucer in the Abbey. And I can conceive that in ages to come Nelson's famous phrase of, "Victory or Westminster Abbey," might be replaced by the hope of warrior, statesman, or poet to be thought worthy to lie in the Mausoleum of Alfred.

When the thousandth anniversary of Alfred comes round, we all trust that the royal Lady, the 49th sovereign since Alfred, may be able and willing to give her personal sanction to a national Festival. Modern history has no such sequence of national continuity to present—no throne, no institutions, no organic patriotism, no literature of such vast duration and such venerable traditions. And this is a healthy and fruitful form of patriotic feeling. It can offend no man, neither in these islands nor in the Empire, nor abroad in other nations. The little Englander and the greater Englander, the Englishman and the Imperialist, Old England and New England, can unite in honour of the great King who ruled an England far smaller than any little England of to-day, yet whose genius and heroism made it the nucleus—the *pou stó*—of all that his descendants ever held in their dominion, of all that his descendant, Her Majesty, holds in dominion at this hour. The memory of Alfred calls up no thought of Conquest, but the noblest form of Defence, it calls up international sympathies and co-operation, a great civilising and missionary task, it suggests schools, temples, libraries, industries, courts of justice, civic organisation:—all the boundless influence of a great brain and a majestic character, be the field of his energy a small as a single province and the materials to his hand of the simplest sort.

Many other modes of using for ourselves and our children this matchless occasion occur to me, on which to-night I can only touch. There is still needed a perfectly complete and critical edition of every line of the King's authentic writings. We should never forget that Alfred is the Father of English History, the Founder of English prose. He is in the true sense the Father of the History of the English people—in a sense more literally true than Herodotus ever was the "Father of History"—in that Alfred gave an impulse and form to the *English Chronicle*, the oldest national record in modern Europe; and himself wrote or inspired the writing of some of its typical parts. He is the Founder of English prose, in that he not only formed an organic prose, but his influence caused the maintenance of English prose until the Conquest for the time superseded it by Latin and French. No

perfect collection of these noble pieces of our scholar King has yet been made: and it would form a worthy task for a company of Scholars to achieve it.

Nor again, is there any adequate English biography of our great Hero. After all that has been done by eminent scholars who have given us every authentic fact ascertainable in Alfred's career, there is yet no full and adequate biography of the King by an English hand. The splendid pictures drawn by Green and by Freeman, in more than one work of each, remain after all but glowing sketches; and they are but episodes embedded in voluminous works. And, excellent as is the German work of Dr. Pauli, it is possible to imagine a new biography based on more recent research, and worthy to rank with the masterpieces of English prose.

Perhaps it is not too late for the Holy See to repair its neglect to place Alfred amongst its canonised Sovereigns. There are already twelve of these in the Calendar, we are told: not one of the twelve the peer of the Saxon King—whom four centuries ago our Henry VI. vainly besought the Pope to canonise. Rome acts always with deliberation. But, after a thousand years, it may yet recognise the holiness of a saint the halo of whose glory will last as long as the Church.

Some commemoration of the great King there is certain to be in the millenary year 1901. I would raise a voice in hope that it may be at once national and worthy of the nation: that it may not degenerate into a scramble or a farce. It would be an occasion to call for representation of every side of our national life—as the pulse from Alfred's mighty heart throbbed into every vein of the nation's organism. Soldiers, sailors, scholars, churchmen, missionaries, teachers, councillors, judges, prelates, artists, craftsmen, discoverers—chiefs and people—all alike might gather to do honour to the royal genius who loved them all, who breathed into them all his own inspiration. I can imagine an assemblage of chosen delegates from our regiments and our fleets, from cathedral, abbey, church and chapel (without distinction of creed), from universities and schools, from art and science academies, from libraries and institutes, from Parliament and from Government, from courts of justice and from county halls and city councils, from the labourers in town and country—all joining around a national monument to our first great Hero. Such military display as was thought right would best be furnished forth by the volunteers and naval reserves in honour of the King who first organised a regular militia at home for the defence of our shores by sea and land—whose very name as

a warrior spells "*Defence—not Defiance.*" Such a national commemoration would be a real festival of industry, art, order, union, peace and religion.

No people, in ancient or modern times, ever had a Hero-Founder at once so truly historic, so venerable, and so supremely great. Alfred was more to us than the heroes in antique myths—more than Theseus and Solon were to Athens, or Lycurgus to Sparta, or Romulus and Numa were to Rome, more than St. Stephen was to Hungary, or Pelayo and the Cid to Spain, more than Hugh Capet and Jeanne d'Arc were to France—more than William the Silent was to Holland—nay, almost as much as the Great Charles was to the Franks.

The life-work of the Great Alfred has had a continuity, an organic development, a moral, intellectual, and spiritual majesty which has no parallel or rival amongst rulers in the annals of mankind. And I cannot doubt that four years hence the English-speaking people will remember him who gave them the precious germs of that which our forefathers have made a thousand years of national life and honour.

FREDERIC HARRISON.

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